FOXHOLE HISTORY
THE T-54 / 55

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Near East
Observers

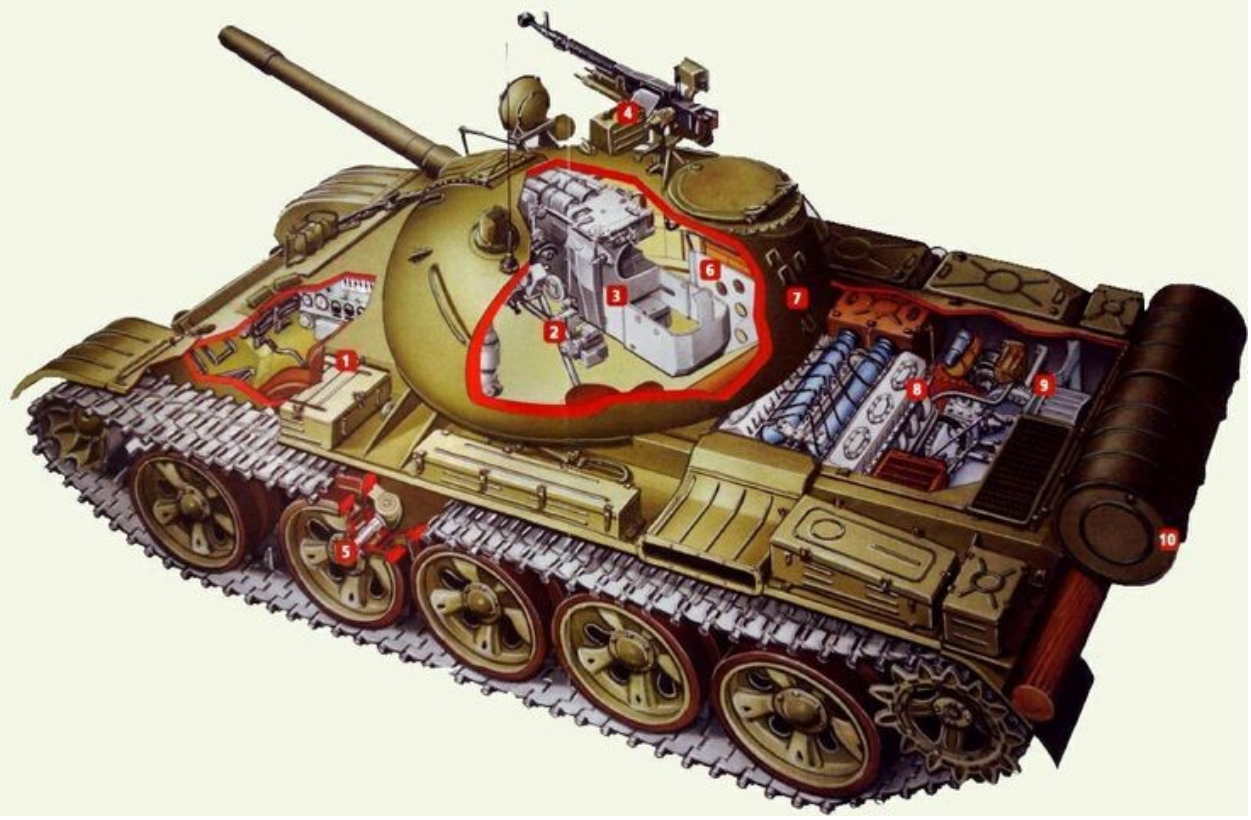
The T-54 / 55 Tank

The T-55 tank is a vehicle that received some of the earliest and most prolific post- Second World War shipment to various countries, especially the Middle East. The nations of Egypt, Iraq, Syria, and the Yemens all used the T-54/55 as their mainstay armor. Since this style was used so prolifically, this Foxhole History will look at three different nations that used it, Egypt, Syria, and Iraq.

Technical Details

As all of the tank edition Foxhole Histories have indicated, the T (Type) of a Soviet tank was essentially the result of a series of upgrades which eventually compounded into a type that was now the sum of its changes. The baseline tank was the T-34. After a long series of upgrades

and changes, the T designation was changed to that of T-44. It had then evolved and emerged as the T-54 which went through its own short series of changes resulting in the advancement to the 54 and then 55 designation. This meant that a Soviet or Middle East tank crew member could be inserted into the tank and could fairly rapidly grasp the main elements of tank operation, likely having sat through (literally) the tanks which came through in their sub-variants. This increased efficiency and reduced training time, adding a substantial benefit to those nations that could not, or did not want to, invest in long-term continuous training.



The T54/55 was one of the larger of the tanks. It was, at full length, with the gun barrel 29 feet long, was 10 feet wide, and with arms 8 and a half feet high. The tank was able to ford rivers that were 4 feet deep

without the snorkel but could be fitted and adapted to go into water that was up to 18 feet deep, fully submerged and able to cross into an enemies territory. This was anticipated to be a short and quick transit, there was no effort or thought that it would conduct operations submerged. The armor was remarkably thin, only 6.7 inches thick, with a cast, or single mold, transversible turret. The tank was armed with both a main automatic gun, a secondary automatic gun in the bow, near the driver's compartment, as well as an anti-aircraft gun which could fire on aircraft that were engaging in strafing maneuvers. It had a maximum road speed of just 30mph and a distance of 249 miles. The speed of the tank became a central issue with it, especially as many of the Middle East countries continued to operate and maintain their stocks in general up through the 1970s and this became an issue when they encountered anti-tank weapons. These became quicker, larger, and more portable, which meant that the tank was more vulnerable. The later models adjusted this and trade a level of armor protection for greater speed, thus making the tank less vulnerable to men who were setting up and firing these new ATGMs. The T-54/55 did have a smoke screen feature which released smoke through the rear diesel engine compartment. This allowed some measure of protection but likely at the cost of the tank, or tanks, that were sent to cross in front of incoming fire.

Tank Inventories for Iraq, Egypt, and Syria

All nations work on the basis of military doctrine. Military doctrine coordinates and asserts not only how a nation will fight but also, how, with what material. The variables are multiple and dependent on a range of factors that can be inclusive of personality of leadership, geography, finances devoted to defense / offense, and assessments of who the main adversary will be at any given time. The various countries listed below all had distinctive pressures and considerations directing their doctrine and how they constructed their armor program, not all of which was strictly centered on tanks. The following is just a basic review of the number of T-54/55 tanks purchased, but also may help us understand their military doctrines.

Iraq, in the period between 1950-1990, possessed a total of 2,100 T-54/55 tanks. These were supplied by a wide number of countries, by far the largest was China via supplying them with 1,000 of the Type 59 which was the Chinese variant of the T-54/55. The other leading nations were Poland and the Soviet Union which supplied 400 t-54/55 tanks each during the 1980s with other countries supplying as few as 50 each. This demonstrates Iraq’s huge investment in its armor program and why it could not find uses

for all of them and which often led to many tanks being abandoned and unused for long enough periods that they rotted. It should be remembered that Iraq also possessed large numbers of T-72s and Type 62 tanks from China.

In the period from 1950-1990, Egypt received 1,530 T-54 tanks and 700 T-55 tanks, which comes to an overall 2,230. The armor program for Egypt was different than that of Iraq. Iraq placed heavy emphasis on a limited number of tank types and more of those that they preferred. Egypt had a far more diversified armor program taking in a large range of tank types as well as smaller or alternate armor vehicles (tank destroyers, personnel carriers, and smaller armed vehicles). The high number also has to be understood in terms of tanks per square mile. For the number of tanks that Egypt possessed at anyone time, they had perhaps fewer in ratio of potential battlefield coverage. Another interesting phenomenon of this number is that none of the tanks in their inventory, according to the source, came from China and Chinese variants. Syria, between 1950 and 1990, held 850 T-54s and 1,375 T-55s. Syria did not receive, according to the source, any tanks from China.

Tanks in Culture

As with other weapons explored in Foxhole Histories, the tank as a vehicle and as a weapons system (having several weapons which interact and are dependent on each other for their operation) reached a profound level of cultural as well as military identification and association. In the early modern Middle East, a sheikh would look to the number of camels that he possessed and the number of men that he could mount on them, he used these as symbols of his power and authority in the tribe. He could use these as the beginning of negotiations, displaying wealth for his adversary to view. Perhaps all he needed to do was show up with his vast camels and riders, cowing his rival into quick amity and submission. In similar vein, the tank became the symbol of arriving at the level of a modern army. The tank and possessing massive armor formations was now seen as a military and national status symbol making the nation a credible military threat and able to impose its will across borders. Some national leaders became obsessed with the concept of awing and cowing their rivals not by camels but armor formations parked on their borders. This, however, descended into a raw numbers game, it became less about the maintanence of the individual tanks and the training of the crews and became focused on paper strength. Could a nation out possess tanks in significant numbers? If the answer was yes this was seen as not only being impressive but the beginning of the bargaining process.

The paper strength mentality led to the unpleasant realization on the part of some sister Arab nations that others were not as conscientious about their maintenance. In an example of this, Syria received several hundred tanks from Iraq but, on close examination, many of them had been allowed to be subjected to the harsh desert environment, being left out in the sun to bake and degrade. Other tanks had bird nests and infestations of insects due to a lack of care and were, in some cases, beyond actual use and just became symbolic strength. Syria was non-to-grateful in these cases. However, for the leadership of Iraq, it was a gesture of brotherly Arab support.

SUMMARY

It really appears that doctrinal considerations for tank forces had a deep root in the cultural heritage of the Middle East. This influence has been felt more acutely in some Middle East countries than others. We cannot breakdown much of this here but, it is interesting to view that this appears to have been more of a

factor in Iraq than in Egypt or Syria. The other interesting point is how this impacted the sale of one type above almost all others throughout the region. No other tank type would achieve as deep and continual presence as the T-54/55 tank. The appearance of the T-72 on the battlefields only testified to the fact that the T-54/55 was in a word, cheap. It could be mass produced and mass exported throughout the Middle East and that this influenced it wide distribution more than anything else. While the Soviets maintained and retro-fitted these tanks to increase their survivability and service life, this was not able to followed in the Middle East, instead being replaced by fewer, more expensive models.